

science summary



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Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs): Understanding and Promoting Pro-Environmental Behaviour Change

A new report published by the Environment Agency explores ways to encourage smaller businesses to adopt more environmentally friendly practices.

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which are registered businesses with up to 249 employees, are the economic lifeblood of the United Kingdom. In 2006, they represented £1.4 trillion (49 per cent) of turnover and employed 14 million people (48 per cent).

The UK Government has supported this positive economic performance by reducing burdens of regulation, but SMEs are also responsible for a large proportion of environmental pressures. In 2006, SMEs generated 60 per cent of commercial waste produced in England and Wales, and caused nearly half of all serious industrial pollution incidents. In addition, three-quarters of companies fined £5,000 or more for environmental incidents were SMEs. Checks on these SMEs are likely to decrease under the current regulatory regime of reducing burdens on business.

The Environment Agency is investigating behaviour change methods to influence the environmental performance of SMEs, for example by encouraging them to recycle more of their waste. The purpose of this review is to help the Environment Agency understand pro-environmental behaviour change in SMEs and provide case studies as a source of good practice.

The project was carried out by a student at the University of Leeds, as part of an MSc Sustainability (Environmental Consultancy and Project Management) qualification. The research was carried out in two phases: a review of published research, followed by a study involving interviews with three case studies. Two of the interventions were funded by Defra's Environmental Action Fund (EAF), and one by the London Development Agency.

Three initiatives were used as case studies:

- Bioregional Development Group, One Planet Products. An online database set up to encourage

sustainable procurement in the construction sector. Membership has increased from a dozen firms to 32 companies subscribed to the website.

- Cumbria Action for Sustainability, collaborative waste project. The creation of recycling networks in isolated areas by a local group, which got businesses talking and working together on recycling streams.
- Global Action Plan, Smartworks. The provision of tailored, practical advice to businesses on ways to reduce their environmental impact. The scheme has so far supported over 300 businesses.

The recommendations from this report include:

- Use tangible, pragmatic solutions to help SMEs modify their negative environmental behaviours.
- Promote pro-environment behaviours as core to SME business operations.
- Consistently advise SMEs to use the NetRegs site.
- Reduce the amount of information an SME initially receives when using NetRegs, via a more thorough search engine and/or limits on the amount of data viewed.
- Create simple, generic auditable environmental action plans to allow businesses to engage in pro-environmental behaviour change internally.
- Develop case studies of SMEs changing their behaviour for use by other SMEs and Government.
- Find out from SMEs what business models would best help them on PEBC.
- Explore social marketing techniques to determine whether these could encourage behaviour change.

This summary relates to information from Science Project SC080017, reported in detail in the following output(s):

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